MIPAM ON BUDDHA-NATURE

The Ground of the Nyingma Tradition

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INTRODUCTION

This book addresses the relationship between presence and absence (emptiness) in Buddhist thought. It focuses on the Nyingma (*rnying ma*) tradition of Tibet as articulated in the works of Mipam (*'ju mi pham rgya mtsho*, 1846–1912), a great synthesizer of Buddhist doctrine and Nyingma philosophy. Mipam incorporates an extraordinarily wide range of discourses into his grand, systematic interpretation of Buddhist doctrine. I draw widely from his writings on the Middle Way (*dbu ma, madhyamaka*), epistemology (*tshad ma, pramāṇa*), and tantra to discuss the significance of an ontological "ground" (*gzhi*), or Buddha-nature, as the central theme in his overall interpretative scheme. I present Mipam's view across a range of topics to underscore Buddha-nature and a dialectic of presence and absence as a central thread that runs through his interpretative system.

The presence of Buddha-nature as intrinsic within the ground of existence is a predominant feature of the discourses of tantra in the Nyingma tradition of Tibet, and in particular, the Great Perfection (*rdzogs chen*). The Great Perfection is a textual and meditative tradition that affirms the nature of mind as the Buddha, and offers a radically direct approach to actualizing this reality. The view of the Great Perfection consistently evades systematic analysis and in a fundamental way is antithetical to abstract conceptual determination. While Mipam did not write extensively on the Great Perfection as an isolated topic, he elucidates the view of the Great Perfection in his exoteric writings by creatively formulating the esoteric discourses that have defined the Nyingma tradition—namely, the Great Perfection—in terms of central exoteric discourses of monastic Buddhism: Buddha-nature, the Middle Way, and Buddhist epistemological systems.

He skillfully incorporates esoteric discourses of Mantra (*sngags*) characteristic of his Nyingma predecessors into his commentaries on Indian śāstras.

Buddhist epistemology, a system that delineates the authentic means of knowing reality, plays an important role in Mipam's exegesis across both domains of esoteric and exoteric doctrines. Mipam integrates aspects of the Buddhist epistemological tradition with a view of Mantra, and associates the view of the Great Perfection with Prāsaṅgika-Madhyamaka. The Great Perfection is the Nyingma tradition's highest esoteric teaching and Prāsaṅgika-Madhyamaka is the philosophy commonly accepted in Tibet as the highest exoteric view. By integrating the esoteric teachings of Nyingma tantra with Buddhist epistemology and Prāsaṅgika-Madhyamaka, Mipam affirms the Nyingma as not only a tradition of tantric exegesis and ritual practice, but also as grounded within the rigorous intellectual traditions of Buddhist exoteric philosophy.

While discussing Mipam's treatment of Buddha-nature, or the ground, across a number of issues in his works, we will address in detail his representation of affirmation and negation. The English terms "affirmation" and "negation" refer to the realm of linguistic representation. To depict the issues at stake in a more meaningful way, I use the words "presence" and "absence," which have more of an ontological connotation—*what is* rather than simply its linguistic representation. Presence as such can be understood in two ways:

1. as a reified presence—the realm of conceptual or linguistic knowledge.
2. as an indeterminate presence—the realm of the mystical or divine ground of being.

We will see how the former presence is rejected, and discuss implications of the latter presence in Mipam's interpretation of Buddhist doctrine. In particular, we will look into the tension, or resonance, between the problem intrinsic to formulating such presence conceptually (or linguistically) as well as its fundamental place within the Buddhist tradition. A central concern here is the nature of philosophical reasoning and intellectual inquiry into Buddhist scriptural traditions.

PRESENCE AND ABSENCE

In the course of this book, we will see how a dialectic of presence and absence is a central theme in Mipam's works. The relationship between

emptiness and divine presence involves a fundamental tension in Buddhist exegetical discourse. For Mipam, a key to the resolution of this tension is the unity of emptiness and divine presence. The ground, or Buddha-nature, is a focal point around which he articulates this unity.

The topic of Buddha-nature spans the domains of metaphysics, theology, and philosophical anthropology. An etymology of the term "Buddha-nature" (*tathāgatagarbha*)[1] reflects the variable status and complexity of the subject matter. The Sanskrit compound *tathā* + *gata,* meaning "the thus gone one" (i.e., Buddha), is the same spelling as the compound *tathā* + *āgata,* meaning "the thus *come* one"; the term reveals the dual quality of a transcendent Buddha thus gone and an immanent Buddha thus come. Also, *garbha* can mean "embryo," "womb," and "essence." On the one hand, as an embryonic seed it denotes a latent potentiality to be *developed* and the subsequent consummation in the attainment of Buddhahood. As a womb, it connotes a comprehensive matrix or an all-embracing divine presence in the world to be *discovered.*

Academic scholars have described Buddha-nature in a number of ways. David Ruegg addresses a dual function of Buddha-nature in a dialectic between a *soteriological* point of view, in which the absolute is immanent in all beings, and a *gnoseological* point of view, in which it is altogether transcendent.[2] We can see that Buddha-nature is at once transcendent, a future potential, and at the same time immanently present. As such, Buddha-nature functions as a mediating principle spanning both the absolute and phenomenal worlds.

Another term for the Buddha-nature is "heritage" (*gotra*). Ruegg cites three main meanings of the term *gotra* in Buddhist usage: (1) germ, seed; (2) family, clan, lineage; (3) mine, matrix. He also mentions that the term *gotra* is designated *extensionally* as a soteriological or gnoseological category, and *intensionally* as the spiritual factor or capacity that determines the classification into that category.[3] The topic of Buddha-nature also is a basis for promoting "one vehicle" (*ekayāna*) of the Buddha, an inclusivist system of the Mahāyāna that incorporates all Buddhist traditions. The role of Buddha-nature as the single heritage of all beings distinguishes the Buddha-nature from Vijñānavāda (Mind-Only) traditions that accept five distinct heritages within three final vehicles (*śrāvaka, pratyekabuddha, bodhisattva*).

Another scholar, Florin Sutton, delineates three other roles of Buddha-nature: from a *theoretical* point of view, Buddha-nature is an extension of the Self/no-self debate, "providing the Yogācāras with a new, positive platform of defense against both the Hindu Eternalists and the Buddhist Nihilists"; from a *didactic* (or *practical*) point of view, it functions as an intermediate step between a narrowly defined notion of Self (*ātman*) and a more thorough understanding of no-self (*anātman*); and from an *ethical* point of view, it provides a philosophical basis for altruism in the Mahāyāna. Sutton also explains Buddha-nature to function in three ways: (1) as an essence, an "underlying ontological Reality, or essential nature behind phenomena"; (2) as an "embryo" or "seed"—a dynamic, evolving potential; and (3) as a "matrix" or "womb," an "intermediate" meaning (between the first two meanings), equated with the universal ground consciousness (*ālayavijñāna*).[4]

The discourse of Buddha-nature, as a pure essence abiding in temporarily obscured living beings, is a considerable diversion from the negative language found in many other Buddhist texts. The unchanging, permanent status attributed to Buddha-nature is a radical departure from the language emphasizing impermanence within the discourses of early Buddhism. Indeed, the language of Buddha-nature is strikingly similar to the very positions that Buddhists often argue against, demonstrating a decisive break from the early Buddhist triad of impermanence (*anitya*), suffering (*duḥkha*), and selflessness (*anātman*). The *Uttaratantra* (*ca.* fourth century), the first known commentarial treatise to deal explicitly with this topic, states: "The qualities of purity (*śubha*), self (*ātman*), bliss (*sukha*), and permanence (*nitya*) are the transcendent results."[5] Such affirmations are conspicuously absent in many other Buddhist texts. However, these terms are found in sūtras such as the *Laṅkāvatāra*, *Gaṇḍavyūha*, *Aṅgulimālīya*, *Śrīmālā*, and the *Mahāparinirvāṇa*, where they are used to describe the Buddha (*tathāgata*), the Truth Body (*dharmakāya*), and the Buddha-nature.[6] Furthermore, the *Laṅkāvatāra* uses the term "supreme Brahman" to describe the ultimate state of existence (*niṣṭhābhāvaḥ paraṃ brahma*).[7]

While the Perfection of Wisdom (*prajñāpāramitā*) Sūtras can be seen to function as an overturning of early Buddhist literature by depicting all phenomena as empty, Buddha-Nature Sūtras mark another radical inversion with the use of *ātman* in a positive light. This language has been said to have soteriological "shock value," to uproot reified conceptions of emptiness.[8] Nathan Katz has fittingly termed this phenomenon of contradictory claims as "hermeneutical shock."[9] The tension between the discourses of presence, as in the Buddha-Nature Sūtras, and emptiness, in the Perfection of Wisdom Sūtras, is a rich source from which divergent interpretations grew, and one that has a long history in the developments of Buddhist discourse. In an important way, opposed opinions and sectarian debates on this issue create and maintain the dynamic vitality of Buddhist traditions.

A lively dialectical tension between Buddha-nature and emptiness has continued in Tibet in terms of the competing doctrines of "other-emptiness" (*gzhan stong*) and "self-emptiness" (*rang stong*). The language of other-emptiness—which portrays the ultimate truth in affirming language—explicitly conflicts with the orthodox Geluk (*dge lugs*) formulation of the ultimate as a mere absence of inherent existence. A central issue concerning the status of other-emptiness is a recurring tension between presence and absence, which in Buddhist terms gets expressed in various ways such as appearance and emptiness, conventional and ultimate truth, Buddha-nature and emptiness, and other-emptiness and self-emptiness. This issue can be seen to have a history extending back to India in the competing depictions of the absolute as qualified (*saguṇa*) or unqualified (*nirguṇa*). A major tension in Tibetan thought is found between the positions that the ultimate truth must be a simple emptiness—a negation—in contrast to the positively framed depictions of ultimate reality as a divine presence existing at the ground of all. Across this spectrum we find a wide array of positions.

The most famous proponents of other-emptiness are found within the Jonang (*jo nang*) tradition, and Dölpopa (*dol po pa shes rab rgyal mtshan*, 1292–1361) in particular.[10] A view of other-emptiness in general involves affirming an ultimate ground of reality as a metaphysical presence that is empty of all phenomena that are extrinsic to it. We will discuss Dölpopa's view of other-emptiness in chapter 3, as well as look into the views of a Jonang scholar of the last century, Khenpo Lodrö Drakpa (*mkhan po blo gros grags pa*, 1920–1975).[11]

Tsongkhapa (*tsong kha pa blo bzang grags pa*, 1357–1419) and his Geluk followers were major critics of the Jonang, the emblematic tradition of other-emptiness. In contrast to the Jonang depiction of other-emptiness as a metaphysical presence, Tsongkhapa consistently argued that the ultimate truth is necessarily a mere absence.[12] He offered a clear delineation of what ultimate truth is: the lack of inherent existence. We will see how other traditions portray the ultimate truth in more affirming language, and offer a less delimited portrayal of ultimate reality than the one championed by the Geluk tradition following Tsongkhapa.

In order to fully appreciate the dialectical tension between presence and absence in Tibetan thought, we need to recognize the central role that the works of Dharmakīrti (600–660) and Candrakīrti (600–650) have played in Tibet. Representations of exoteric Buddhist discourse in Tibet have been dominated by the commentaries of Dharmakīrti and Candrakīrti. It is important to not only recognize this fact, but also to acknowledge its implications for how Buddhism is interpreted.

In Tibet, the negative dialectics of the Middle Way are typically identified with Candrakīrti's interpretation of Nāgārjuna, and systematic epistemology is associated with Dharmakīrti. These two figures are also held to be authoritative commentators on a univocal doctrine of Buddhism. Even though Candrakīrti explicitly criticized Buddhist epistemological systems in his *Prasannapadā*,[13] Buddhists in Tibet have integrated the theories of Candrakīrti with Dharmakīrti's epistemology in unique ways.[14] Within this integration, there is a tension between the epistemological system-building on the one hand, and "deconstructive" negative dialectics on the other. The integration of an epistemological system within the Middle Way is an important part of Mipam's philosophical edifice. He calls the integration of these two systems "the intertwined necks of the lions of the Middle Way and valid cognition."[15]

Along with Candrakīrti and Dharmakīrti, an important Indian figure for Mipam in particular is Śāntarakṣita (*ca.* eighth century), who synthesized components of epistemology with the Middle Way in a system of Yogācāra-Madhyamaka. Mipam explains that Śāntarakṣita's *Madhyamakālaṃkāra* is a treatise that demonstrates the essential point of all Mahāyāna, Sūtra and Mantra.[16] He states:

> Such a scripture as this is the universal path of the Mahāyāna, integrating the viewpoints of the scriptures of the two chariot traditions like water mixed with water. In particular, both (1) ultimate valid cognition in the way that Nāgārjuna asserts and (2) conventional valid cognition in the way that Dharmakīrti asserts are combined as one taste in the great ocean of reason.[17]

Śāntarakṣita's system of Yogācāra-Madhyamaka is important for Mipam in significant ways: not only does Yogācāra play a fundamental role in his systematic presentation of exoteric Buddhism, but it plays an important role in the narrative structure of the entire Buddhist path by putting forward wisdom as the ground and fruition of the Buddhist path. Moreover, the synthetic approach of Yogācāra is instrumental to the way that Mipam incorporates various systems of Buddhist thought in Tibet.

However, it is the reconciliation of Buddha-nature—particularly the affirmations of presence in tantra and the *Uttaratantra*—with depictions of emptiness in Candrakīrti's *Madhyamakāvatāra* that is a central part of

Mipam's exegesis. Mipam weaves together aspects of Dharmakīrti, Candrakīrti, and the *Uttaratantra* into his unique exegesis of Buddhist doctrine.

A number of scholarly works on Mipam have surfaced in the past decade. One example is Karma Phuntsho's recently published *Mipham's Dialectics and the Debates on Emptiness*. He discusses Mipam's works in light of polemical exchanges with Geluk scholars, and his work is an excellent source for Mipam's treatment of emptiness. Also, John Pettit's *Mipham's Beacon of Certainty*, which is focused around a translation of one of Mipam's texts with an annotated commentary, offers biographical information and provides a general background to central issues in Mipam's writings.

Another book-length study of Mipam was done by Paul Williams, whose work deals with the notion of "reflexive awareness" (*rang rig*) in Mipam's commentary on the ninth chapter of the *Bodhicaryāvatāra*.[18] In his book, Williams makes a case that Mipam can be understood as a proponent of "other-emptiness."[19] Matthew Kapstein, however, questions the usefulness of the indigenous labels of "self-emptiness" and "other-emptiness" in interpreting Buddhist thought, and cites a danger in overly generalizing these categories. As an alternative, he suggests that it is important to document the precise usages of such terms as they are employed by indigenous traditions.[20] In chapter 3, I have tried to document some ways in which "other-emptiness" and "self-emptiness" have been used by the specific Jonang and Nyingma authors I address, in order to further the understanding of how emptiness is represented in these traditions in general, and Mipam's position in particular.

There has been little written directly concerning the topic of Buddha-nature in the Nyingma tradition, particularly in Mipam's works. I intend to clarify the central role of Buddha-nature in his works through a broad-based representation of Mipam's view of Buddha-nature that takes into account his treatment of epistemology, negative dialectics, and tantra. By drawing upon a wide range of discourses that he treats, my aim is to provide a holistically-oriented account of Mipam's view of Buddha-nature.

HISTORICAL SURVEY

In the nineteenth century, what came to be known as a "nonsectarian" (*ris med*) movement developed in the eastern Tibetan province of Kham (*khams*). Alliances of a ritual, intellectual, literary, and institutional character formed among the traditions of the Kagyü (*bka' brgyud*), Sakya (*sa skya*), and

Nyingma following the political ascendancy of the Geluk tradition in central Tibet. This era of Tibetan history witnessed an intellectual and literary renaissance driven by a wave of creative doctrinal syntheses and new institutional movements toward formalized monastic education. The Nyingma tradition came to play a particularly influential role at this time, and a central figure and primary architect of the era was Mipam.

Mipam’s Nyingma tradition identifies its origins within the dynastic period of the eighth century, although a self-conscious Nyingma tradition, known as the “old school,” actually developed in response to attacks on the legitimacy of its translations by the Sarma tradition, the “new schools,” which began to develop in Tibet from the activities of the famous translator Rinchen Zangpo (*rin chen bzang po,* 958–1055) in the eleventh century. Efforts to affirm the legitimacy, and superiority, of the Nyingma tradition are evident from early on in the works of Rongzom (*rong zom chos kyi bzang po, ca.* eleventh century) and Nyangrel (*myang ral nyi ma’i ’od gzer,* 1124–1192).

The Nyingma, with a textual tradition of translations dating back to the early dissemination of Buddhism in Tibet, claim a distinctive connection with the imperial age of Tibet—a theocratic polity populated by the enlightened figures of the Dharma King Trisong Detsen (*khri srong lde’u btsan*) and Padmasambhava—as well as translators who had privileged access to the living tradition of Buddhism in India before its destruction at the hands of Muslim invaders in the eleventh century. The Nyingma have been able to periodically reinvigorate their tradition to serve the contingencies of history through their “close lineage” (*nye brgyud*) of revealed teachings. In this close lineage, Buddhist canonical teachings are not limited to a specific set of texts, nor a specific individual in history, but remain within a tradition of an ongoing revelation, that in principle is open to anyone, at anytime.

Before Mipam, the Nyingma tradition was largely defined by their esoteric transmissions, particularly those of the *Guhyagarbhatantra.*[21] While many scholars of the Nyingma tradition certainly studied the exoteric texts of Buddhist sūtras and śāstras, they did not commonly write commentaries that focused on such exoteric texts. An important part of Mipam’s contribution to his Nyingma tradition was to provide commentaries on exoteric texts that incorporated a Nyingma esoteric view.

Rongzom and Longchenpa (*klong chen rab ’byams,* 1308–1364) are Mipam’s main Tibetan sources. Rongzom, an eleventh-century Nyingma apologist, composed a commentary on the main tantra of the Nyingma tradition, the *Guhyagarbhatantra.*[22] In his *Establishing Appearances as Divine,*[23] Rongzom notably draws upon Buddhist epistemology, exemplifying a unique relationship between tantra and Buddhist epistemology in Nyingma exegesis. Longchenpa, the fourteenth-century systematizer of Nyingma thought, also wrote a commentary on the *Guhyagarbhatantra,*[24] and is renowned for his writings on the Great Perfection, such as the “Seven Treasuries.”[25] Mipam wrote catalogues for the publications of the Collected Works of Rongzom[26] and the “Seven Treasuries” of Longchenpa.[27] The influences of Rongzom and Longchenpa are prominently reflected in Mipam’s works, particularly Longchenpa and the tradition of the Great Perfection. In many ways, his works can be seen as an extended commentary upon the writings of Longchenpa.[28]

Another important figure in the Nyingma tradition was Lochen Dharmaśrī (*lo chen dharmaśrī,* 1654–1717). Lochen and his brother, Terdak Lingpa (*gter bdag gling pa ’gyur med rdo rje,* 1646–1714), both of whom took ordination from the Fifth Dalai Lama (1617–1682), were important figures in the transmission of the Nyingma canon (*bka’ ma*).[29] Terdak Lingpa founded the Nyingma monastery of Mindröling in 1670.[30] Lochen wrote commentaries of the *Guhyagarbhatantra,*[31] as well as a commentary on the three vows by Ngari Paṇchen (*nga ri paṇ chen padma dbang rgyal,* 1487–1542),[32] which we will address in the context of discussing the view of “other-emptiness” in contrast to Mipam’s representation of emptiness.

We will also look briefly into the works of Getsé Paṇchen (*dge rtse paṇ chen, ’gyur med tshe dbang mchog grub,* 1761–1829), a Nyingma scholar from Kaḥtok (*kaḥ thog*) monastery, who set forth a view of other-emptiness that he says accords with the Great Perfection.[33] An explicit adoption of other-emptiness can be found in the Nyingma tradition affiliated with Kaḥtok monastery, which apparently stemmed from the works of Tsewang Norbu (*tshe dbang nor bu,* 1689–1755) in the eighteenth century. The popularity of other-emptiness in the nineteenth century seems to have been largely due to Tsewang Norbu.[34] He told Situ Paṇchen (*si tu paṇ chen chos kyi ’byung gnas,* 1699–1774) that if he upheld the view and practice of other-emptiness, then his activity would be certain to flourish, and he would bring benefit to the teachings and beings.[35] Situ Paṇchen was the founder of Pelpung (*dpal spungs*) monastery and the editor of the Degé (*sde dge*) edition of the Tibetan translations of the Buddha’s Word (*bka’ ’gyur*). Gene Smith conveys that Situ Paṇchen blended Mahāmudrā with a view of other-emptiness that he propagated throughout the Karma Kagyü traditions in Kham.[36]

Kongtrül (*kong sprul blo gros mtha’ yas,* 1813–1899), one of Mipam’s teachers, was a prominent figure at Pelpung in the following century. Kongtrül took up a view of other-emptiness as a means to unify the various sectarian views in Tibet.[37] His *Encyclopedia of Knowledge*[38] is a tremendous resource on different views and systems of thought throughout Tibet. Gene Smith credits Kongtrül's *Encyclopedia of Knowledge*, finished in 1864, as likely "the earliest statement of nonsectarian thought."[39]

Along with Kongtrül, another of Mipam's teachers, Jamyang Khyentsé Wangpo (*'jam dbyangs mkhyen brtse'i dbang po,* 1820–1892), was a prolific figure in nineteenth-century Kham. Among the many texts Khyentsé composed in his massive, twenty-four volume Collected Works, he wrote a summary of the other-emptiness view of the Jonang.[40] It is significant that the text immediately following this one in the volume is an exposition of the view and philosophy of Tsongkhapa, who is known as the founding father of the Geluk tradition and a prominent critic of the Jonang view.[41] Such an eclectic character is a predominant feature of the nonsectarian movement.

MONASTIC EDUCATION AND THE NONSECTARIAN MOVEMENT

Before the nineteenth century, the Nyingma tradition was mainly defined by its practice and exegesis of tantra, in particular, the *Guhyagarbhatantra.* This central tantra of the Nyingma tradition embraces what may be called a pantheistic vision of the world as an expression of divinity.[42] The institutional transformation of the Nyingma tradition in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was a complex process of a systematization, or domestication, of the tantric vision of divine unity. Before the developments in monastic education during this time, the Nyingma tradition was more of a meditative, contemplative, and ritual tradition centered on the mystical vision of tantra. Mipam's work is a product of the synergy between the wild, divine world of tantra and the structured, analytic rigor of monastic education.

Mipam's work can be seen as a synthesis of two polarities that form the contours of Buddhism in Tibet: the esoteric discourses of tantra and the exoteric discourses of monastic education. His treatment of Buddha-nature plays a particularly important role in this synthesis. Through his exegesis of Buddha-nature, Mipam shows the compatibility of esoteric discourses such as the Great Perfection with the exoteric discourses of valid cognition (*tshad ma, pramāṇa*) and the Middle Way, which in his day played a prominent role in monastic education.

Earlier in the nineteenth century, Gyelsé Zhenpen Tayé (*rgyal sras gzhan phan mtha' yas,* 1800–1855?) had played an important role in the revitalization of Nyingma monasticism. He published the Nyingma canon (*bka' ma*) for the first time in ten volumes, founded Śrī Singha college at Dzokchen monastery, and instituted the rituals for the three foundations of the Vinaya at the monastery: the biweekly ritual of the vows for individual liberation, summer retreat, and the ritual for summer retreat recess. He rebuilt Dzokchen monastery with the support of the rulers of Degé, among others, after it was destroyed by an earthquake in 1842.[43] Many large monastic colleges soon followed the model at Dzokchen.[44]

Along with Dzokchen, another source of Nyingma monasticism comes from Kaḥtok, the oldest Nyingma monastic tradition, which stems back to the twelfth century. At Kaḥtok monastery, the Norbu Lhünpo (*nor bu lhun po*) monastic college, or "the tantric college of one hundred scriptures," was founded in 1906. This college was founded by Mipam, along with Kaḥtok Situ (*kaḥ thog si tu chos kyi rgya mtsho,* 1880–1923/25), and extending from this college, twenty-five monastic colleges were founded through Kaḥtok Situ's work.[45]

The hermeneutical principle of other-emptiness, adopted from the Jonang tradition by Kaḥtok Tsewang Norbu and Situ Paṇchen Chökyi Jungné, came to be employed by Nyingma scholars at Kaḥtok and Kagyü scholars at Pelpung. Nyingma scholars at Kaḥtok monastery appear to have drawn upon the exegetical language of other-emptiness more so than those at Dzokchen.

Mipam offers a uniquely Nyingma interpretative style that differs not only from other-emptiness, but also from Khenpo Zhenga (*mkhan po gzhan dga',* 1871–1927), a prominent professor at Dzokchen and an important figure in the revitalization of monastic education.[46] Nyoshül Khenpo (*smyo shul mkhan po 'jam dbyangs rdo rje,* 1931–1999) delineates two traditions of explanation in the Nyingma tradition: (1) the transmission of Khenpo Zhenga, which is the manner that Indian scriptures such as the thirteen great scriptures are explained, and (2) the transmission of Mipam, which is the manner of explanation mainly based on Tibetan commentaries such as Longchenpa, Rongzom, and Ngari Paṇchen. He states that many from Kaḥtok mainly follow the latter tradition.[47]

Khenpo Zhenga is famous for compiling textbooks for monastic colleges comprising his interlinear commentaries on "the thirteen great scriptures," Indian treatises that were considered to be the important texts representing the spectrum of major Buddhist discourses—namely, the Abhidharma, the Vinaya, the profound view (of the Middle Way), and the "five treatises of Maitreya."[48] Khenpo Zhenga concerns himself with an exposition upon Indian sources, not the Tibetan layers of commentary, in an attempt to interpret the Indian texts on their own terms.[49] His commentaries can be seen as a means to circumvent sectarian disputes by appealing to Indian originals rather than some specific strand of nearly one thousand years of Tibetan commentary.[50] His work contrasts not only with Kongtrül, who embraced an explicit other-emptiness interpretation, but also with Mipam. Mipam's works have a stronger Nyingma sectarian identity.

Nyoshül Khenpo quotes Mipam as stating that his own works were composed to ensure the legacy of the Nyingma tradition in future generations, whereas Khenpo Zhenga's transmission "maintains the viewpoint of Candrakīrti and both Rongzom and Longchenpa as the life-force, and spreads the continuum of explanation and practice in all directions."[51] In this light, Mipam's works can be seen to maintain a stronger sectarian identity than Khenpo Zhenga's; Mipam's own works explicitly draw from the Nyingma works of Rongzom and Longchenpa.

In contrast to the uniquely Nyingma identity concerning the commentarial tradition of Buddhist exoteric texts that Mipam had forged for Nyingma monasteries in Kham, several Nyingma monasteries in Amdo (*a mdo*), including the Dodrup (*rdo grub*) tradition, adopted Geluk exegesis for their exoteric curriculum while maintaining Nyingma tantric studies as their esoteric base.[52] The reliance on Geluk exegesis, however, became a target of Mipam's polemical works. Although he promoted an inclusivist agenda characteristic of the nonsectarian movement, he affirmed a strong Nyingma identity.

Before we turn to Mipam's life and works, I should mention that what it means to be nonsectarian is complex. It clearly does not mean that all traditions are seen as equal on all levels. Rather, attention to a broad range of interpretations can be seen as a general quality of what it means to be nonsectarian in Tibet. Such attention to a plurality of interpretations does not (necessarily) mean a coercive amalgamation of others' views with one's own, but involves a move in the direction of inclusiveness that contrasts with a more insular model of scholarship that frames the boundaries of discourse within a more narrowly delineated tradition of interpretation.

A unique quality of Mipam's form of (non)sectarianism is the level of his engagement in dialogue with his main "opponent," the Geluk: he appropriates certain aspects of Geluk thought, yet argues against what he finds to be problematic with their system of interpretation. His approach contrasts with four other ways of responding to the dominance of Geluk tradition, such as: (1) a more hostile attitude toward Geluk positions, such as found in the works of Gorampa;[53] (2) a more submissive attitude to Geluk authority on exoteric exegesis, such as found in the Dodrup tradition; (3) a more dismissive attitude that excludes Geluk from the conversation and remains focused solely within one's own tradition, such as what may be seen in the case of Padmavajra,[54] one of Mipam's teachers; and (4) a fourth alternative—wholesale conversion to Geluk (willed or forced). Mipam forged an alternative response to Geluk dominance by selectively appropriating certain features of the Geluk tradition while contesting others. It is this response that has become the formula for the enduring legacy of non-Geluk monastic colleges.

The nonsectarian tradition of Tibet is not univocal, and what it means to be nonsectarian is not so clearly delineated. A broader range of particular texts and traditions needs to be documented before we can understand the nature of a nonsectarian stance of Tibet. Also, further research into the sociohistorical matrix of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Kham will be necessary before we can better assess the (non)sectarian climate of this time period.

Because newly formed alliances and shifting territories were characteristics of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Tibet, it may be that it was an ideology of alliance that characterizes the so-called nonsectarian movement. In Kham, the proliferation of incarnation lineages exemplifies this. There, we witness the emergence of a system developing from one recognized incarnation to three (body, speech, mind) and five (quality and activity), as multiple incarnations of deceased teachers were recognized within other sectarian traditions.[55] Actively forming alliances between disparate sectarian traditions helped strengthen feeble traditions. After the devastation of the Nyakrong wars in the middle of the nineteenth-century,[56] Kham, which is sandwiched between the two dominant forces of China and central Tibet, proved to be a contested territory. It was in this turbulent and creative time that Mipam lived.

LIFE AND WORKS OF MIPAM

Mipam was born to an aristocratic family in Degé in eastern Tibet.[57] He memorized Ngari Paṇchen's *Ascertaining the Three Vows* (*sdom gsum rnam nges*) when he was about six years old. He also studied Indian and Chinese systems of astrology at a young age. When he was ten, it is said that he was "unobstructed in reading and writing," and composed a few short texts.[58] He became a novice monk when he was twelve, entering the monastery of Jumohor (*'ju mo hor gsang sngags chos gling*), a branch of Zhechen (*zhe chen*) monastery connected with the lineage of Mindröling. There, he was a child prodigy, and came to be known as "the little scholar-monk."[59]

After doing a retreat for eighteen months at Junyung (*'ju nyung*) on Mañjuśrī, the Lion of Speech, it is said that he achieved signs of accomplishment. From then on, he knew the scriptures without studying, and did not need to study other than simply receiving reading transmissions (*lung*). He went to Golok (*mgo log*) in 1859, due to the onset of the Nyakrong wars. In 1861, he went to Lhasa on pilgrimage, and studied at the Geluk monastery of Ganden (*dga' ldan*) for about a month.[60]

He studied with a number of prominent teachers of his day, including Khyentsé, Peltrül (*dpal sprul o rgyan chos kyi dbang po,* 1808–1887), and Kongtrül.[61] With Peltrül, he studied the *Bodhicaryāvatāra*; and later composed a commentary on the ninth chapter of the *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, the Wisdom Chapter. His commentary became a source of contention with some scholars in the Geluk tradition.[62] Mipam studied the common arts, such as grammar, with Kongtrül, as well as various extraordinary practices of ripening and liberation. With Dzokchen Khenpo Padmavajra (*padma badzra,* 1867–1934), he studied a wide range of scriptures: Sūtra, Mantra, and the arts.[63]

When Mipam studied the *Madhyamakāvatāra* with Geshé Ngawang Jungné, he asked for only the reading transmission, saying that he need not bother with a detailed commentary. After hearing the teacher read the text just once, Mipam then explained it all from the beginning. The teacher responded, "Although I have the title of 'Geshé' (doctor, professor), I don't have even a fraction of the intellect of this one!"[64]

Mipam is a unique figure of his time because he was not endorsed as an incarnate lama (*sprul sku*), at least not while alive. Also, unlike many other prominent figures of his day, such as Kongtrül, Khyentsé, and Chokgyur Lingpa (*mchog gyur bde chen gling pa,* 1829–1870), Mipam did not actively promote the new traditions of treasure text (*gter ma*) revelations; he neither discovered earth treasure texts (*sa gter*) publicly nor wrote extensive commentaries on them.[65] Rather, he wrote numerous commentaries on a variety of diverse topics, ranging from logic, poetics, the Middle Way (both Prāsaṅgika and Yogācāra), medicine, astrology, including a sex manual; in short, he was a polymath.[66] He also wrote on Tibetan translations of Indian texts, including tantras from the "new schools" (*gsar ma*),[67] the *Guhyagarbhatantra* of his own Nyingma tradition, and Buddha-nature, which is the primary focus of this book.

Mipam wrote on a variety of subjects. His literary output, which has been reproduced in twenty-seven volumes, is among the largest of any Tibetan author. A catalogue of his works divides his texts into four cycles: (1) the cycle of narratives and eulogies, (2) the cycle of ordinary arts, (3) the cycle of the inner art (i.e., Buddhism), and (4) the cycle of dedications, auspicious verses, and prayers. The first cycle, which is said to foster faith, has four sections concerning:

1. eulogy
2. narrative
3. worship
4. miscellaneous supplications[68]

The second cycle of ordinary arts, which is said to foster comprehensive knowledge, has two parts: (1) the four major arts and (2) the subsidiary arts. The four major arts are:

1. linguistics
2. epistemology
3. material arts
4. healing, together with additional topics[69]

The subsidiary arts are:

1. poetics
2. astrological divination
3. counsel
4. miscellany[70]

The third cycle is divided into four sections (the first of which is the primary topic of this book). The four sections are:

1. Commentaries on the viewpoint of the Vehicle of Characteristics:[71]
    - Commentaries on the general meaning of scriptures
    - Commentaries on the specific scriptures
2. The Vajrayāna of the common inner-tantras and outer-tantras[72]
3. The extraordinary Vajrayāna of the quintessential instructions of the *Kālacakratantra*[73]
4. Oral instructions on practice within the unexcelled Nyingma:
    - Explanatory commentarial notes[74]
    - Ritual accomplishment texts[75]

- Quintessential instructions on the activities[76]
    - Specific four activities:
        - pacifying
        - enriching
        - magnetizing
        - subjugating
    - Common variety
- Oral instructions on practice.[77]

The last of the four main sections of Mipam's corpus is the cycle of dedications, auspicious verses, and prayers.[78]

While we are left with a voluminous corpus of his literary output, Mipam's life story describes him as not studying very much, and spending a lot of time in retreat. He was encouraged to write commentaries on the major Indian and Tibetan treatises by his teacher, Jamyang Khyentsé Wangpo.[79] He states that he wrote the texts to fulfill his teacher's wishes. Also, he says that he wrote them due to the fact that the teachings of the Nyingma tradition had dwindled to near extinction, and that most people were simply following after what others say.[80] Unlike the other prominent sectarian traditions in Tibet, the Nyingma did not have an authoritative commentarial corpus on the central exoteric Buddhist treatises from India before Mipam.

His texts have been very influential and many of his works came to be adopted within the curriculum of Nyingma monastic colleges. Mipam's works have continued to play an important part in the monastic colleges in India, Nepal, and Tibet up to the present day. His texts constitute about 25 percent of the entire course of study at Larung Gar (*bla rung gar*), which lies in the eastern Tibetan region of Serta (*gser rta*) and is currently the largest monastic college in the world.[81] Also, the curriculum of the Ngagyur Nyingma Institute in Mysore, India, which is currently the largest Nyingma monastic college in exile, includes Mipam's commentaries on Indian treatises such as the *Abhidharmakośa*, *Madhyamakālaṃkāra*, *Pramāṇavārttika*, *Mahāyānasūtrālaṃkāra*, the ninth chapter of the *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, and *Kāvyādarśa*. Their curriculum also includes his commentaries on Longchenpa's *Wish-Fulfilling Treasury* and *Guhyagarbha* commentary, as well as Mipam's compositions such as *Gateway to Scholarship*, *Sword of Supreme Knowledge*, *Beacon of Certainty*, and *Lion's Roar: Exposition of Buddha-Nature*, among others.[82] His works have come to play a prominent role in Nyingma monastic education.

Two events in Mipam's life in particular directly relate to the topic of this book. The first is his dream of Sakya Paṇḍita, a thirteenth-century Sakya scholar, upon his reading of Dharmakīrti's influential text on Buddhist epistemology, the *Pramāṇavārttika*. In his dream, Sakya Paṇḍita tells Mipam, "What is to be known about epistemology in the *Pramāṇavārttika*? It is negation and affirmation."[83] He then divided the text in two and told Mipam to put the two parts of the text together. When he did, they became a sword and all objects of knowledge appeared before him. He swung the sword once and cut through them all unobstructedly. Henceforth, there was not a word in the *Pramāṇavārttika* that he did not know.[84]

Within Mipam's visionary experience, we get a hint of the import of the all-inclusiveness of negation and affirmation in the system of epistemology set up by Dharmakīrti. Dharmakīrti put forth a binary system of knowledge: (1) the real and (2) the unreal. The real and the unreal correspond to the radical dichotomy of (1) particulars and (2) universals, respectively. These two are validly known by either (1) direct perception or (2) inference; exclusively by means of either (1) nonconceptual, "affirming engagement" or (2) conceptual, "eliminative engagement" (negating contradistinctions). All these dichotomies boil down to negation and affirmation.

The dichotomy of negation and affirmation is a central part of the structure of Dharmakīrti's epistemology. Negation and affirmation constitute the two means of conventional valid knowledge, and understanding this dichotomy is fundamental to understanding Buddhist epistemology, at least as it functions on the ordinary level.[85]

Another significant moment in Mipam's life story is when he debated with Japa Dongak (*'ja' pa mdo sngags*), with Peltrül acting as moderator. The debate appeared to be even, so Peltrül suggested that they turn to the topic of "the universal form of the Great Perfection" (*rdzogs pa chen po'i spyi gzugs*) because Japa Dongak had written a commentary on this. It is during the debate on this topic, "the universal form of the Great Perfection," that Mipam won the debate.[86]

Here we see that the Great Perfection is not simply an anti-intellectual meditative practice that rejects reasoned inquiry; it can involve analysis and polemical exchange. Indeed, the dialectical inquiry into the Great Perfection has a prominent place in Mipam's works. Herein we find his significant contribution to Nyingma philosophy, and it is this topic that distinguishes the unique character of his view. The meaning of the Great Perfection, as conveyed through the ground (*gzhi*) and Buddha-nature, is central to the Nyingma view.